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SUBJECT: HAQL, SAUDI ARABIA: NOW, WHERE THE HECK IS THAT?

JEDDAH 00000290 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A 3-member American delegation of ConGen Jeddah officers recently visited Haql, Saudi Arabia, a city that lies almost within swimming distance from major tourist resorts in Jordan, Israel, and Egypt. Haql reaps none of the rewards for its location in such a prime tourism region. Instead it is isolated by strict Saudi entry policies and geographic remoteness from other major cities in Saudi Arabia, and by the small, inconvenient border that connects the town to Aqaba, Jordan. ConGen officers subsequent personal travel to Jordan, Israel, and Egypt revealed that Haql -- a city whose lights glimmer clearly in the night's sky to those living in the neighboring countries -- is virtually unknown to its Arab and Jewish neighbors. A meeting with the Haql mayor revealed that the town's focus leans mostly inward, the new university under construction being the top priority. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) A SLEEPY CITY PERCHED BESIDE MAJOR JORDANIAN, ISRAELI, AND EGYPTIAN RESORTS: ConGen officers (Poloff, PDoff, ARSO) traveled to Haql, Saudi Arabia on May 27, 2009. A small city that sits on the Gulf of Aqaba, just a few kilometers from the border with Jordan, Haql can be seen in the distance from Aqaba in Jordan, Eilat in Israel, and Taba in Egypt. Despite its proximity to these major touristic resorts, one could easily enter Haql unaware of the throngs of European and other tourists sunning themselves on beaches just minutes away. According to the mayor, Haql and its environs boast a population of 30,000. The city itself feels working-class, its buildings basic, with none of the flashy commercial trappings that one would expect at a resort or for that matter in larger Saudi cities. A few small, rudimentary chalets dotting the coast near the Jordanian border hint at the direction Haql might have taken had it not found itself in Saudi Arabia.

¶3. (SBU) A CITY WITH NO NAME: After departing from Haql, ConGenoffs visited Aqaba, Eilat, and Taba within a two-day period on personal travel. Through the duration of their trip, they openly shared the story of coming from Saudi Arabia overland with fellows travelers and locals. Their story raised inquisitive looks in Jordan and astonished glances in Israel and Egypt. Individuals on all sides had almost uniformly never heard of Haql -- especially so in Israel and Egypt. Even the Jordanians had little knowledge of the neighbor to the South. At a hotel in Taba Heights, Egypt, astride the water, and with a clear view of Haql across the gulf, long-time employees and residents alike had no idea of what city they were looking at, some guessing that it was Aqaba, while a few assuming Saudi Arabia, but without knowing the name of the place. ConGenoffs met no one in the three countries who had previously visited Haql.

14. (U) A QUIET BORDER TO JORDAN: The border between Haql, Saudi Arabia, and Aqaba, Jordan, is clearly not a major crossing point. Most Saudis and foreigners who cross into Jordan do so using two other inland borders with higher capacity and access to major highways. The Haql mayor indicated that 500-1000 persons daily transit the border. At the time that ConGenoffs crossed the border -- at mid-day -- traffic was limited to a few cars and trucks headed in the direction of Jordan. The mayor commented that some families are split between Jordan and Saudi Arabia and use this border for visitation. Facilities on neither side of the border are equipped for tourists, and few if any border staff are able to converse in English.

15. (SBU) POTENTIAL FOR TOURISM HIGH WERE IT NOT FOR NATURAL CONSTRAINTS: Haql sits atop a vast, largely undeveloped Saudi coastline along the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea. Unlike the crowded Jordanian and Israeli coasts, the Saudi side has almost limitless, empty space for resorts. The coral reefs and diving opportunities in the Gulf of Aqaba are considered world class. The area between Haql and the Northern Saudi city of Tabuk is occupied largely by stunning red deserts and rugged mountains piercing through the sands, a landscape that extends down from the heavily touristed Wadi Rum in Jordan. Despite these potential attractions, there is no indication of foreigners visiting the area, either from within Saudi Arabia or from the tri-country area to the north and west. While the area is easily reached from the three non-Saudi resort cities next to it, Haql is remotely located within Saudi Arabia. The closest significant airport sits in Tabuk, two hours away.

16. (U) MAYOR OF HAQL MEETS FIRST US DELEGATION: The Haql mayor received the American delegation, the first diplomats

JEDDAH 00000290 002.2 OF 002

in memory to have visited the city. The mayor explained that he sees tourism as a potential area of growth for the small city and pointed out that there are good opportunities in this sector, but did not elaborate further on any plans. The mayor spoke with pride about a new university that will be installed in Haql in the near future. The university's academic focus will be administration and will allow more students to attend university since at the current time the nearest Saudi university is a full two hours away -- located in Tabuk.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The opportunity for an American delegation to visit Haql provided insights about a remote area of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that has had little exposure to the United States and Western culture. Contrasts between Haql and the neighboring resorts in Jordan, Israel, and Egypt could not be more stark. On the one hand, the potential for tourism to Haql seems high -- given its natural resources and the easy access by travelers to the tightly-packed Gulf of Aqaba resort region. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's strictly-controlled and still limited touristic ventures in recent years are not likely to awaken Haql from its quiet slumber. END COMMENT.

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